

with an execrable mythology. There is an odious interference of "the gods," sometimes by their dissensions with one another, perplexing and confounding the rules of human obligation; often contravening the best intentions and efforts; depriving virtue of all confidence and resource; despising, frustrating, or punishing it; turning its exertions and sacrifices to vanity or disaster; and yet to be the objects of devout homage, a homage paid with intermingled complaints and reproaches, extorted from defeated or suffering virtue, which is trying to be better than the gods. Nothing can be more intensely dreary than the moral economy as represented in much of that drama. Let any one contemplate it as displayed, for example, in the Prometheus Chained or the whole stories of (Edipus and Orestes. On the whole I have conceded much in saying, that a small portion of the morality of that drama may have a place with that of the best of the didactic moralists.

I shall not dwell long on the biography and history, since it will be allowed that their influence is very nearly coincident with that of the epic poetry. The work of Plutarch, the chief of the biographers (a work so necessary, it would seem, to the consolations of a Christian, that I have read of some learned man declaring, and without any avowed rejection of the Bible, that if he were to be cast on a desert island, and could have one book, and but one, it should be this), the work of Plutarch delineates a greatness partly of the same character as that celebrated by Homer, and partly of the more dignified and intellectual kind which is so commanding in the great men of Lucan, several of whom indeed are the subjects also of the biographer.* Various distinctions might, no doubt, be remarked in the impression made by great characters as illustrated in poetry, and as exposed in the plainness of historical record: but I am persuaded that the habits of feeling which will grow from admiring the one or the other, will be substantially

* "The book of books," says Alfieri, the Italian tragic poet, in his "Autobiography," "the one which made me pass away the hours of that winter (1769) with ravished delight, was Plutarch! His lives of those truly great men, as Timoleon, Caesar, Brutus, Polopidas, Cato, I read four or five times with such transport of excitement, tears, and enthusiasm, that a person in an adjoining room would have supposed I was mad."